

Triage: Dr. James Orbinski's Humanitarian Dilemma

By [JOHN ANDERSON](#)



'Triage'

<http://www.variety.com/review/VE1117935936.html?categoryid=31&cs=1&nid=2562>

"One can't be so afraid of dying that you miss living," according to the subject of helmer Patrick Reed's "Triage: Dr. James Orbinski's Humanitarian Dilemma," which follows the doctor -- the former president of Medecins Sans Frontieres (Doctors Without Borders) -- back to Africa 15 years after he came to the aid of victims there in Rwanda and Somalia. What one observes via Reed's portrait isn't that Orbinski is defiant of danger, but that his sense of decency is so strong it over-powers any fear. Which is a considerable accomplishment, in a film that deserves wider exposure than it's likely to get.

During the time of filming, Orbinski was in the midst of writing his memoirs, so he was already in a reflecting mode when Reed decided to accompany him from his home in Toronto to Somalia, where Orbinski and other MSF doctors worked during the country's civil war. The contrast between fine cinematography and the subject matter -- the former by [John Westheuser](#), the latter being Orbinski's heavy memories -- has seldom been in such high contrast. From Orbinski's measured, but unavoidably gruesome accounts of the atrocities he witnesses, the dilemma of the title would seem to be asking why he would work so hard to save members of a species capable of such appalling violence.

"I don't think it's heroic," he says. "I think it's decent. I think it's normal." Given what he saw, his outlook is both dizzying and inspiring.

But as a colleague puts it, Orbinski is "the ultra cynic and the ultra optimist." Forced into a political role, his life threatened numerous times, the good doctor would seem to have formed a shell, a callous, that protects him from his own memories, but that is not, as Reed shows us, actually true.

In one technically brilliant stroke by the filmmakers, Orbinski hesitates during a painful recollection and Reed fills in the gaps with dialogue from another interview; the scene remains uninterrupted, and Reed doesn't intrude on Orbinski's dark reverie.

The doctor is not a stone, we see. But what the film establishes quite clearly, and, largely through pure observation, is how much effort it takes to maintain the dignified persona that is Dr. James Orbinski.

Production values are tops, notably the sound and Westheuser's HD photography.